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Tunisia's Postcolonial Identity Crisis
A Key to Understanding the Lure of Extremism

Youssef Cherif

In Tunisia today – a country burdened by a weak economy and experiencing precarious security – the hotly debated question of Tunisian identity opens up a vacuum for radical groups to fill. Since its independence in 1956, Tunisia has been through three major historic chapters, each offering strikingly different views of Tunisian identity: the era of Habib Bourguiba (1957–1987), of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011), and the revolutionary period that began in 2011. While the dictatorships of Bourguiba and Ben Ali were characterized by a top-down approach and a repression of all opposition, the post-2011 period of democracy and freedom of speech has allowed Tunisians to conduct grass-roots discussions of what they identify with. Different identity cards have been played in the newly introduced electoral game, however, which makes defining what it means to be Tunisian a divisive practice indeed.

Having undergone three major identity shuffles in six decades, the Tunisian population has been exposed to a range of competing views about its past and future. Today, post-dictatorship political parties, instead of cementing peace between people and resolving opposing grand narratives, have only deepened the rifts, mainly for electoral reasons. This in turn is affecting the country's youth, whose doubts about their own identity are making them susceptible to radical ideologies.

"Being Tunisian" today is explained by two major, contradictory narratives. One side, mainly represented by the Islamist Ennahdha party, sees Tunisia as an integral part of the Islamic world, with its customs and united trajectory, and blames the country's semi-Westernization on French colonialism and postcolonial policies. The other side – loosely described as secularist and composed of different political parties over the year, most recently by the Nidaa Tounes party – takes a more nationalistic view, placing Tunisia within a context of Mediterranean

cosmopolitanism and sees the country as sharing some of Europe's principles. This side links the rapid "Islamization" of the country to the influence of Arab Gulf countries. These poles have stronger iterations as well. More extreme types of Islamists may serve as a grassroots to ISIS, while on the nationalist side, one may see advocates of authoritarian police states modeled on the postcolonial regimes that preceded the revolution using the "fight against Islamism" to justify their abuses of citizens' rights.

Between these poles are other, more nuanced but less influential narratives. These include the identity prophesied by former President Moncef Marzouki's supporters, which combines Islamist/pan-Arabist attachments and Europhile opinions; that of the leftist pan-Arabists, strong components of the Popular Front, who refute both Westernization and Islamization, while linking Tunisia to

pan-Arab, anti-imperialist past, and present causes; and other, more marginal views that pop up occasionally in the public sphere.

These debates are to be found less in rural settings than in urban ones, where political parties operate and where different media and social media outlets are watched, heard, and read. Facebook is the place where opinions are discussed and expanded the most. The social media platform is often the starting point of subsequent media wars regarding the positions mentioned above. The Islamist narrative is more widespread, however, as mosques and Islamic charities are a natural conduit for it and have greater influence on Tunisia's remoter regions.

Bourguiba

Like most postcolonial states, Tunisia underwent a large identity shuffle in the first years of independence. Under the leadership of President Habib Bourguiba, Tunisian academics were tasked with creating a new Tunisian identity that would break both with the immediate colonial past and with the more rooted Husainid history.[1] In the new postcolonial schools, Tunisians were taught that their country dates back to the Phoenician period and that Tunisian identity was the result of a solid mixture of different civilizations.

Bourguiba made sure that the whole narrative revolved around his person and his own struggle for independence. Exceptions were made, such as keeping some of the values of French modernity in high regard, or glorifying the anti-colonial king Muhammad Moncef Bey (r. 1942–43). But in general, what preceded Bourguiba was demonized or erased. Hence the French era was presented as sheer colonialism, the Husainid dynasty as corrupt and malicious, and so forth.[2]

In his quest for a modern and uniquely "Tunisian" state, Bourguiba wanted to take his people out of the cultural sphere of its time – that of Muslims and Arabs. His policies therefore relegated to the margins those who defended pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. Those were to be found essentially in Tunisia's south and west, inland, and more generally among the youth, who bridled under his authoritarian regime. By the end of the 1980s, the opposing forces became mostly Islamist – as in many countries in the MENA region such as Egypt, Morocco, and Jordan.

Islamism in Tunisia is the successor of a previous movement, Youssefism, which opposed the 1955 negotiated agreements with France and the perceived Westernization of society.[3] The Mouvement de Tendance Islamique (MTI), which later became Ennahdha, was the spearhead of Tunisia's Islamists. Its grassroots and leadership included radical elements who prepared for armed conflict, be it through low-scale bombing campaigns such as the 1987 series of attacks on hotels or bigger projects, such as the coup attempt designed by MTI's "Security Group" in 1987.

Although Islamists were at moments coopted, they were more often harassed and brutalized by the Bourguiba regime. All of Ennahdha's leaders were jailed at least once in the 1980s, and some of them were sentenced to death, including the party's founder Rached Ghannouchi. Bourguiba himself was not shy about expressing his disdain for some Islamic traditions while openly defending secularism. This provoked the anger of more traditional elements in society. Repression only strengthened the opposition and gave Islamists more legitimacy in their political and ideological claims.

Yet Bourguiba's anti-colonial narrative benefited from a favorable international context. It was an era of pompous state building, and many Tunisians saw a positive difference between their quality of life and those of their parents. This included the introduction of elementary education on a broad scale, a gradual advance of public electricity and running water, job openings in the public sector, the liberation of women, and more.

The imposed nationalism did appeal to large segments of society, and Bourguiba's efforts bore fruit. Bourguiba and his colleagues are largely credited with coining the postcolonial identity of the Tunisian state. At the same time, however, repression was rampant under his tenure, and those opposed to his vision faced widespread torture in prisons as well as extra-judiciary arrests and violence. Corruption was also high, with his inner circle benefiting from extensive privileges.

Ben Ali

When Prime Minister Ben Ali, a former director general of national security, toppled Bourguiba in 1987, he behaved toward the latter's memory almost in the same manner as Bourguiba had toward his predecessors: by eliminating his traces. He shortened the space in history textbooks that Bourguiba had carved for his persona, introducing himself and his own "accomplishments" to the younger generation. In most public spaces, Bourguiba's name, statues, and slogans were removed and very often replaced with Ben Ali's own regalia.

Some of Bourguiba's actions were reversed, such as state secularism, which saw the introduction of a religious softener to calm the Islamist anger.[4] Ben Ali increased the space allocated to Islamic and Arabic history

in school textbooks, and courses in religious (Islamic) education were given more importance in school curricula. Ben Ali himself went on pilgrimage in 1988, adopting the title "Protector of the Land and Religion" and introducing religious concepts into his speeches. He has also released Ennahdha's members from prison and allowed them to participate in elections. At the same time, however, the new leader was not known to be pious or religious in any way, and his changes mainly took the form of folkloric gestures. He also did not deviate radically from Bourguiba's secular policies. Moreover, the corruption that later marked his reign, essentially centered around his family, made his Islamist reforms look like hypocrisy in the eyes of many. The growing socioeconomic divide that marked his era, partly the result of imposed IMF diktats, augmented the sense of alienation and marginalization among different segments of society, especially in Tunisia's south and west.

In terms of Tunisian identity, Ben Ali's strategy was one of "fill in the blanks." Most of the streets and avenues named after Bourguiba were renamed "November 7," commemorating the date he came to power. Where Bourguiba had filled public squares with his statues, Ben Ali erected statues of the "7" and also named schools and squares after that date. He generally refrained from putting his name on public buildings, so while Bourguiba had for instance named bridges and airports after himself, Ben Ali preferred to give them his "7."

It was a personality cult without a personality. Ben Ali virtually lacked charisma. To an increasingly educated population that was growing more connected to the international world, the wooden language adopted by his administration officials sounded dull. Ben Ali was a cold president who kept his people at bay. His attempts to shape a different narrative of postcolonial history actually cancelled some of Bourguiba's achievements in crafting a postcolonial identity, without offering a viable alternative.

What Ben Ali succeeded in building, in fact, was an extremely repressive police state. While initially reaching out to democrats and former opponents, he gradually smashed political life and civil society. His openings toward Islamists were only a façade. Even while softening the social repression of Islam, Ben Ali nonetheless succeeded in increasing its political repression.

By dismantling Bourguiba's narrative and offering a hollow alternative while reversing some directing lines, Ben Ali weakened Tunisia's burgeoning postcolonial nationalism. Meanwhile, his suppression of political life diminished critical thinking in all fields.[5] When he fled in 2011, the youth of the country not only thirsted for liberty and better quality of life but was also in search of an identity.

Revolution and Democracy

To explain the crisis of Tunisia's youth, Ennahdha's Rached Ghanouchi often refers to the "religious desertification" that was imposed under both Bourguiba and Ben Ali.[6] "Who will dialogue with them?" he said in a recent interview, referring to the violent extremists. "There is a religious desertification in Tunisia and we don't have religious scholars anymore."[7] His opinion is widely shared by Tunisia experts and observers, but it misses the other "desertification" that affected Tunisians, especially during the tenure of Ben Ali: the political and identity vacuum.

Ben Ali's departure led once again to a hammering of public memory. In a matter of hours, Ben Ali's symbols and pictures were removed, and the fear he used to convey became mockery of and hatred toward his persona. Even his erstwhile collaborators became outspoken critics of his authoritarian behavior and found that he was a convenient scapegoat for all of Tunisia's woes. The Ben Ali era was soon – in hindsight – described as Tunisia's darkest hour.

A bottom-up program of identity reconstruction then began, one that contrasted with the prior top-down processes. But unlike the previous eras, bashing Ben Ali did not pave the way for a uniform narrative. The spirit of the new Tunisia was "democracy," but enthusiasm for democracy cannot in itself become an identity. Moreover, no one was strong enough to impose any unified vision. Democracy opened a Pandora's box, and the previously oppressed ideologies reappeared.

After 2011, a newly emerging and rapidly growing media space was full of guests claiming different ideologies and offering Tunisians a set of visions they had barely heard of before. Those who were sidelined in the nation-building processes from the 1950s onward joined the fray with views on what the state's identity should consist of. Former young activists, who had by 2011 reached their 50s and 60s – sometimes their 80s – rolled out their ideas the way merchants show their wares. Various kinds of Marxists resumed the old struggles of the Cold-War era. Old-time Islamists who went into structural reforms and adopted a softened, Westernized discourse were clashing with younger, newly radicalized ones. Ultra pan-Arabs were linking Tunisia to an imagined Arab World, while ultra-nationalists tried to disseminate the idea of a three-thousand-year-old nation state, and so on.

Nevertheless, the most enduring debate, and the deepest one, was over Tunisia's spiritual identity: was it more Tunisian than Islamic, or vice versa?

When the Ennahdha party emerged as the major winner of the 2011 election, its opponents did not therefore perceive it as a simple electoral defeat but as a threat to the country's identity. The main argument of the opposition (to Ennahdha), aside from stressing economic and security problems, became that of the threatened Tunisian way of life, the *namat.* Ennahdha, on the other side, tried to unite Islamists and conservatives under its umbrella.

Very quickly, the identity debate became an electoral game.[8] Nidaa Tounes, the party that former Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi created and that elevated him to the presidency of the republic in 2014, was launched in 2012 "in order to save Tunisia's modern way of life." Ennahdha's massive street demonstrations in 2013 were meant to protect not only its "legitimacy" but also "Islamic Tunisia."

The identity game played out on TV, in social media, in the streets, inside parliament, and in many other venues.[9] The 2014 voters' majority did not go to the polls looking for detailed economic or political programs but rather to vote for a specific identity against the other. The tension that this has created was followed after elections by a feeling of betrayal among the voters, when the "Tunisian" party Nidaa Tounes allied itself with the "Islamist" monolith, Ennahdha.

The alliance, meant to reduce polarization and cement the identity schism, quickly became an empty shell when Nidaa Tounes fell apart shortly after. While the Islamist vs. secularist debate has decreased in intensity since the 2014 elections, it did not disappear; the continuous dissolution of Nidaa Tounes as well as Ennahdha's resilience make a return to this polarizing debate imminent.

An Open Debate

The clashes over identity that materialized in the public sphere, at home, and in school, have had consequences on how people relate to their state. Advocates of a return to authoritarianism, on one hand, are taking advantage of social divisions to support their claims: that of defending the nation, in the name of the Bourguibist state and identity, and preventing it from falling into civil strife. This has appealed to many youths. On the other hand, radical anti-authoritarian groups – largely youth led – advocate a total removal of those who worked for Bourguiba and Ben Ali (hundreds of thousands of people), positioning themselves in a semi-opposition to state institutions, and demanding that the country's history be rewritten. Even criminal gangs and corruption rings are carving out a

niche for themselves amid these polarizing sentiments, as the feeling of belonging to the state vanishes and as many young people are therefore engulfed in illicit trade and other illegal activities.

In Tunisian hip-hop, particularly popular among youth who live in poor neighborhoods, slogans against the state are not rare. One song uses the national anthem's first couplet and adds that, in Tunisia, "here your right is stolen" – a strong statement that rights are revoked in the name of the state.[10] Football continues to attract large numbers of youngsters who shy away from politics and civic engagement, with matches often ending in violence between the football clubs' supporters and the police and in hooligans' attacks on public property in the vicinity of stadiums. Burning police stations, ransacking state buildings, and assaulting civil servants are other forms of anti-state actions that did not disappear after the revolution. For some Tunisians, there is no difference between the state and the ruling regime; the state is the political regime of the moment. They see it as a corrupt and brutal useless machine, and their frustration against specific political, social, or economic decisions is often directed toward the Tunisian state itself.

Radical Islamist groups such as ISIS or Al Qaeda are exploiting this malaise to spread their own vision for society, which many Tunisian youth have succumbed to. Unsurprisingly, thousands of Tunisians left the country to join ISIS's self-proclaimed autonomous territory, burning their Tunisian passports in the process and exchanging their Tunisian names for "Khilafah" ones. In doing so, they have deliberately chosen to cancel their Tunisian identity, delegitimize the Tunisian state, and adopt ISIS "citizenship."

This of course needs to be nuanced. The identity problem is not unique to Tunisia. It is a global phenomenon, and particularly keenly felt in the Arab world. Besides, it does not seem out of control, as recent polls have shown that a majority of Tunisians still hold their national sense of belonging in higher regard than any other.[11] The number of Tunisians who joined ISIS, although very high, represents a tiny majority of Tunisia's youth, and the number of victims of terrorist attacks in the country remains limited when compared to other countries such as Libya, Egypt, or even France.

Yet the problem is there, and it needs to be contained before it escalates. The total number of voters in 2014 was one million less than that of 2011, with the highest abstention rate among young voters. Demonstrations and strikes organized by young people, often critical of state policies, are reported on on a daily basis, especially in Tunisia's inland regions. Tunisian fighters in the ranks of ISIS, es-

sentially youth in their 20s, are dispersed throughout Iraq, Syria, and Libya and number in the thousands. Clearly, Tunisia's youth are angry.

Various measures should be taken to help Tunisia's youth cope with this painful identity problem. First of all, a state-led reform of the program of education is needed. Reformers should come up with unifying themes and symbols that may be accepted unilaterally and avoid including divisive lines in history books, especially for younger generations. A possibility would be to postpone teaching post-1956 history to children and teenagers but to keep debating it and popularizing it through civil society. Campaigns may be helpful here to raise awareness among youngsters and adults about important figures and dates from Tunisian history, stressing factors that united the Tunisian people rather than what divided them. Civil society activists involved in such activities must show neutrality and be on good terms with all sides.

As another step, representatives from the state and civil society need to bring together all of Tunisia's political figures for a national dialogue on identity, emulating the 2013 national dialogue that solved Tunisia's political crisis. A defining set of historic figures, dates, and concepts should not be called into question or brought back in every electoral campaign or political battle. The political debate should avoid the accusation of blasphemy (by Islamists) or treason (by nationalists), usually based on one side's or the other's claims to "historic truth."

A Tunisia reconciled with its past can contribute to the success of its democratic transition and provide an example to the rest of a region whose wars are largely legacies from the past.

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Notes

1 The Husainids were the ruling dynasty of Tunisia between 1705 and 1957, credited with consolidating the roots of the nation state in the country. Their later kings, however, signed the Treaty of Protectorate and accepted French colonialism between 1881 and 1956.

2 Driss Abbassi, *Entre Hannibal et Bourguiba: Identité Tunisienne et Histoire Depuis l'Indépendence* (Paris, 2005).

3 The reference is to Salah Ben Youssef, Bourguiba's deputy until 1955 and his archrival thereafter. He was assassinated in 1961, after a quasi civil war between his supporters and those of Bourguiba, which left thousands dead, injured, or arrested.

4 Samy Ghorbal, *Orphelins de Bourguiba et Héritiers du Prophète* (Tunis, 2012).

5 Youssef Cherif, "The 3000: Why Are Thousands of Tunisians Flocking to Daesh," LSE Middle East Centre Blog, September 3, 2015 <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2015/09/03/the-3000-why-are-thou-sands-of-tunisians-flocking-to-daesh/>(accessed December 19, 2016).

6 "Ghannouchi et le salafisme : Nul ne peut accaparer la religion et l'imposer par la force," *Leaders,* November 18, 2012 <http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/9885-ghannouchi-et-le-salafisme-nul-ne-peut-accaparer-la-religion-et-l-imposer-la-force> (accessed December 19, 2016).

7 "Rached Ghannouchi's Full Interview to Leaders" [text and video in Arabic], *Leaders Arabic,* May 17, 2016 <http://ar.leaders.com.tn/article/0779-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B4%D9%8A-%D9%86%D8%BA%D9%8A-%D9%80%D8%B1-%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%BA%D9%80%D9%8A%D9%80-%D9%80%D8%B1> (accessed December 19, 2016).

8 Elections were expected to happen in late 2012, but they were regularly postponed until late 2014.

9 Deborah Perez, "Mythes fondateurs et fabrique du politique dans l'hémicycle: le débat identitaire à l'Assemblée nationale constituante tunisienne," in *Elections et Territoires en Tunisie: Enseignements des Scrutins Post-Révolution, 2011–2014,* ed. Alia Gana and Gilles Van Hamme (Paris, 2016).

10 The song, "Khallouni" (Leave me) in fact blames Tunisian politicians for what they did to the beloved homeland. But the use of the national anthem is evocative. Minute 4.09 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnSuRcmVFEg> (accessed December 19, 2016).

11 Sigma Conseil, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Religion et Politique en Afrique du Nord : Présentation des résultats des enquêtes par sondage en Tunisie, Algérie, Maroc, Libye Egypte (May 2016) <http://www.sigma.tn/upload/1462895681.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2016).